

Childhood Obesity: Researchers Attack a Nationwide Epidemic

Maybe you've heard the old saying, "Tasty is tempting."

If what's tasty and tempting is also rich in fat and calories, this simple truism may help explain why 68 percent of all American adults—and 32 percent of all kids—are overweight or obese. But it is not just our eating habits that are to blame. Lack of adequate physical activity is also a factor. The increase in the amount of time that we spend sitting in front of a computer or watching TV has played a role in making these alarming rates of overweight and obesity three times greater than those of 30 years ago.

Obesity contributes to many health conditions that adversely affect the quality of our lives, including, for example, type 2 diabetes. The incidence of this obesity-linked disease has, not surprisingly, also tripled in recent decades. Some of us will remember when it was known as "adult-onset diabetes." The name was changed when what was once regarded as a disease of grown-ups began frequently showing up in children.

Obesity contributes to other afflictions, as well, including arthritis, gallstones, breathing problems, and high blood

pressure. It is also a risk factor in heart disease and cancer—the two leading causes of death in the United States.

USDA's Agricultural Research Service is investigating new approaches to fighting obesity. These studies are a major focus of our national program of human nutrition research. It makes sense that these urgently needed investigations are carried out by a USDA agency, given the Department's major roles in production of healthful, abundant food and development of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Obesity-related research is now in progress at all six of our human nutrition research centers (see map, page 13). At two of these centers—the Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, and the Arkansas Children's Nutrition Center at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock—the nutrition needs and concerns of the young, from infancy through adolescence, are the primary emphasis. There, obesity prevention studies may yield new strategies appropriate for these age ranges.

Research areas at the children's nutrition research centers include the roles of

food (diet), biology, genetics, epidemiology, and physical activity in weight gain in children.

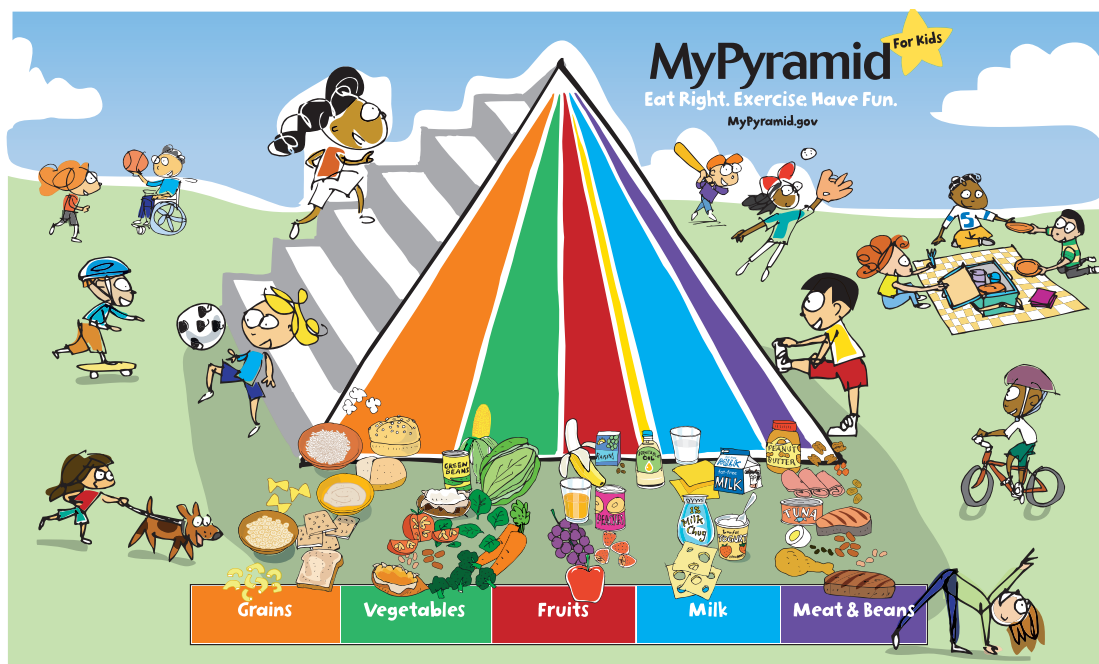
Why look at so many factors?

Because obesity is a multifactorial condition that requires ongoing management to counteract. No single factor or "silver bullet" holds the key to prevention.

This issue of *Agricultural Research* takes a look at some of the ARS research that's designed to better understand—and prevent—childhood obesity. As a scientist, I am excited about the potential of these and other projects to contribute to the health of our nation's children and to stop the trend of unhealthy weight gain.

Some experts predict that—as a result of our nation's huge increase in childhood obesity—the current generation of American kids may be the first to live shorter lives than their parents. We owe it to our children to make sure that this prediction never comes true.

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MyPyramid.gov For Kids is a website that can be used to help advise kids, their parents, and others on how to eat properly and exercise more.